

IN PERSON: JAMES H. LESAR

THE ASSASSINATIONS ARCHIVIST

BY ROSEMARY NIDIRY

In 1969, when James H. Lesar was in law school at the University of Wisconsin, he was so absorbed by the continuing controversy over the assassination of President Kennedy that he volunteered to take time off from school to cover the Clay Shaw trial in New Orleans for the college newspaper.

Two decades later, the nation is still wrestling with the allegations of conspiracy and cover-up that have long surrounded JFK's death. And in the intervening years, Lesar, 53, has turned his personal interest into a professional one: He runs the Assassination Archives and Research Center (AARC), a nonprofit clearinghouse he co-founded in 1984 with the late Bernard Fensterwald, a Washington lawyer and prominent critic of the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy.

"We're not oriented toward 'solving' the case," Lesar said. "We're here to enable as accurate and complete a history to be written as possible."

Even Lesar's law practice has been defined by his long-standing interest in the Kennedy assassination. He specializes in Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) law, and his cases have predominantly been aimed at prying loose assassination-related documents that the government hasn't wanted to release. He defended James Earl Ray, who was convicted of killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. And he was the lawyer who helped Harold Weisberg, the author of *Whitewash: The Report on the Warren Report*, a 1965 critique of the Warren Commission's work, to obtain thousands of classified government documents through FOIA.

"Without Jim, we wouldn't know FOIA as we now know it," Weisberg said in an interview. "He fought some of the toughest cases, some of the longest. It didn't matter that I was broke; he did it for free."

The 400-member AARC, which is dedicated to "collecting, preserving and disseminating" information on American assassinations, is Lesar's full-time passion. Its offices—strewn with law books and yellowing newspapers, with a poster-size portrait of President Kennedy hanging in the reception area—are conveniently located within a block of the FBI, near the National Archives and around the corner from Ford's Theater.



Richard A. Blum

Lesar said that he's not surprised by the amount of attention the Kennedy assassination still commands almost three decades later. In the past few months, the AARC has been fielding about 25 calls a day, up from fewer than 10 a day before Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* rekindled the national debate.

"I think the Kennedy assassination was a fundamental turning point in American history, and a point on which the people feel they've been misled and uninformed," Lesar said. "It's part of the reason for a lot of the mistrust of government you see now."

Although Lesar applauds recent moves within Congress and the executive branch to release many more relevant documents related to the Kennedy assassination, he harbors no illusions that their disclosure will produce conclusive answers. "So much time has passed," he said, "and so much has been done to muddy the waters."

So why bother acquiring and maintaining so much information on an admittedly impenetrable case?

"I think people have a right to know as much as possible about what's going on with their government," Lesar said. "Governments are bureaucracies interested in protecting themselves, and they try to cover up in order to do so."

Mary Ferrell, a member of the AARC's board of directors, began collecting information about the JFK assassination on "the very first day," and over

the years she's amassed a formidable library in her Dallas home.

"I don't suppose [the AARC] is necessary," she said. "But it's certainly useful for young researchers. In the future, there won't be speculation about what was in the documents, because they'll be there in one place."

About 80 per cent of the AARC's material is related to JFK. The rest has to do with King, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., George C. Wallace and others. The archives has more than 2,000 books on assassinations, intelligence, organized crime and drug trafficking; 80,000 pages of FBI records on mobsters and Cuban exile organizations; and 24 filing cabinets full of articles, unpublished manuscripts and notes—most of it donated by freelance researchers—all available free to the public.

"There are a lot of serious researchers who have used it," said retired journalist Seth Kantor, who wrote an acclaimed book on Jack Ruby. "There are other people just trying to get a handle on the Warren report, make sense of it and all the other information out there, who've used it as well."

And, assuming that the JFK case isn't solved, what does Lesar see himself doing 10 years from now? Still working on it, he said, hoping soon to make his voluminous material available to a wider audience through computers and books. What he'd really like to see, though, is a new investigation. ■